

An Ode to Joy

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, December 13, 2020)

The Divine Joy within me greets the Divine Joy within you.

In her book entitled *Laugh your Way to Grace*, Rev. Susan Sparks writes about the saving grace of laughter. In the following quote where she used laughter, I will use the word joy.

The adapted quote reads, "Joy is like a good dose of helium that sets the heart soaring upward. It can free us a little from our worries, lighten our mood, and float for a bit above our concerns for the world. Up high, the world looks less scary. Up high, we gain a sense of appreciation. Up high, we can see our way through many of our problems and situations." In other words, joy is a natural high that enables us to cope.

In the middle of this pandemic, experiencing joy in our day-to-day activities is essential to maintain our well-being and mental health because we continually hear more bad news. Just two weeks before Christmas there are renewed restrictions that require us to shelter-in-place more rigorously, with stores, restaurants, and other businesses closed. The increasing financial instability and political and civil unrest are disconcerting.

It can be difficult to feel joy in a pandemic world where there is so much sadness, separation, fear, loss, and anxiety. This morning we have been celebrating the gift of joy as we acknowledge that life can be challenging but know that it does not have to harden us, and that deep joy exists no matter what life situations we face.

Theologian George Truett said, "In the midst of a year in which it is not difficult to stumble onto suffering, the good news is that we can also stumble onto joy." This morning what a delight it is to courageously let ourselves 'stumble onto joy'.

As I was creating this worship experience, I learned that people can and do experience joy in the shadows of sorrow and the struggles of life, but it is important to recognize the difference between happiness and joy. Those who research joy and happiness suggest that happiness occurs when we feel that life is going well, we are satisfied with it, and we gain pleasure from it. Joy is something more profound and does not depend on positive circumstances. Happiness focuses on the present experience of life, while joy is an illumination, the ability to see beyond to something more life-giving or that free us for a moment from our worries.

In his research, Truett found that joy "has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorrow and even – sometimes, most especially – in the midst of suffering." He suggests that we feel joy deeply when "we are connected to others and when we feel connected to what is genuinely good, beautiful, and meaningful– which is possible even in painful realities."

Henri Nouwen put it this way: while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. "Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away." Joy bubbles up when we feel valued and worthy in spite of what might be causing us to feel diminished or to lose hope.

I wonder if this was the message that the first Christians received upon hearing the Christ child's birth stories. Mary and Joseph were lowly, oppressed, and seemingly unimportant people but were chosen by God. They find themselves in a desperate situation; still, they believe that God will not abandon them.

From these stories, the first Christians learned that God's love was unconditional and available to all people, wealthy, poor, young, old, Jew, and Gentile. God's love existed within the darkness of despair, oppression, and fear. One could only imagine how profoundly they would have been affected by this message. Perhaps an intense joy arose within them knowing they were valued and loved by God and that the Holy One was with them in their suffering and fear.

This morning we heard the iconic passage from the Gospel of Luke, Mary's Magnificat. In this song we hear about how joy-deep human aliveness--can happen amid oppression and about people rising to their full height when they know they are blessed and loved by God.

Mary is at once fearful and joyful about her pregnancy. Imagine singing with joy in a situation that could end in death or in being dishonored and shunned. Within the shadows and uncertainty, still on the margins of society – Mary, a lowly young woman, an undervalued person, yet courageous and poised, sees beyond her present situation. She has a vision of God being on the side of the oppressed and lowly. A deep joy sets her heart soaring, her mood lightens. She sings out powerfully, a joyful and inspiring message about how God's love lifts the lowly and how God walks alongside those who are oppressed and suffering.

In his book *The Pursuit of Joy*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that what enabled the Jews to survive in the past and what allows them to persevere as a 'people' today is their capacity for joy.

"Jewish and Christian history is replete with horrendous suffering, yet people never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, and to sing the Lord's song in a strange land." From a place of joy, they would dance, sing, and give thanks.

Finding ourselves in the middle of a problematic situation and being able to see within and beyond to something that is life-giving can cause joy to burst from the heart. We dance, sing, and give thanks...like a helium balloon, joy lifts us so we can see our way through.

Throughout the ages, people have felt immense joy in the middle of what were awful circumstances. As I mentioned earlier, the documentary being highlighted this Sunday is *Following the Ninth*. In 1824 the Ninth Symphony was composed by Beethoven, who was near the end of his life and who struggled with terrible circumstances and who had no reason to be joyful.

Sick, alienated from almost everyone, and completely deaf, Beethoven had never managed to find love, or have the family he had always wanted. And yet, despite this, he held a deep reverence for God and believed that God's presence existed within the madness, violence, and struggle. He managed to create an anthem of immense joy that embraced the transcendence of divine beauty over suffering. His symphony demonstrates the mysterious capacity of joy to be felt alongside sorrow and to see beyond to a better day.

Celebrated to this day for its ability to heal, repair, and bring people together across great divides, the Ninth symphony has become an anthem of liberation and hope that has inspired many around the world. In 1989 at Tiananmen Square, students played the symphony over loudspeakers as the army came in to crush their struggle for freedom.

In Chile, women living under the Pinochet dictatorship sang the Ninth at torture prisons. The men inside found hope when they heard the voices. As the Berlin Wall came down in December 1989, it collapsed to the sound of Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven's Ninth as an "Ode to Freedom."

Following the Ninth and Mary's Magnificat are remarkable examples of what Julian of Norwich calls "transcendent joy." Transcendent joy is a powerful emotion that exists within the human

heart. It arises when we see beyond our present situations and know that we are not alone. Transcendent joy bubbles up when we disallow the darkness of hatred and fear, suffering and loss, and anger and hostility to diminish the beauty of life. It lifts the heart when people raise their voices against injustice and shine God's light of love in the world. It's as if people are saying, "YOU cannot take away my joy because YOU didn't give it to me... God gave me this joy, God is my joy, and it is deep within me and mine forever."

My friends, joy may not cancel out suffering, but it does exist alongside it. We can survive hardship, loss, and failure if we never lose the capacity to see beyond the present moment and know that there is something better and to believe that we are not alone. In so doing, the joy that arises in that knowledge becomes the natural high that enables us to cope.

Mary was able to rejoice because even in her lowly state and dire circumstances she knew that God was with her and loved her. Beethoven created a stunning symphony because he saw beyond his circumstances; he saw beauty, love, and goodness in the world. The Ninth symphony used in various global struggles enabled joy to arise as people raised their voices for justice and a better future.

As I was writing this reflection, I was saddened to realize that I had not felt such joy for a long time. So, the other day I was shopping in Safeway and feeling sad and down heartened. Music was playing but I never paid much mind to it, which is unusual for me. As I was heading down an aisle, there was young woman looking for something on a shelf and cheerfully dancing to the music. As I passed by her, we looked at each other and we both burst out laughing. As I walked on, still feeling the effects of the dancing and the laughter, the helium of joy lifted my spirit and the gloom I was feeling dissipated. I marveled at how such a simple encounter could have such a joyous impact.

My friends, amid the sufferings of our lives and our aching world, joy exists. Be strong, do not fear – and rejoice! Let us embrace the gift of joy that enables us not to succumb to the chaos of the present that sometimes threatens to pull us off-centre, and to see beyond to something more positive and life-giving and permanent. Let us embrace the joy that helps us bounce back when hard things inevitably happen. May a good dose of joy set your heart soaring upward, freeing you for a time from your worries, enabling you to float for a bit above the concerns of the world. May this be so for us all.